Fighting Fantasies: Authoring RPG Gamebooks for Learning Game Writing and Design

José P. Zagal & Corrinne Lewis
Entertainment Arts & Engineering
University of Utah
50 S. Central Campus Dr, RM 3190
Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA
jose.zagal@utah.edu, corrinne.lewis@utah.edu

ABSTRACT
Students learning to design and write games face a diversity of challenges. For example, they might lack knowledge and experience in certain game types (Zagal and Bruckman 2007), or an understanding of fundamental components of narrative structure. In this article we describe an assignment we feel helps address some of these challenges. We have developed a gamebook writing assignment, specifically one using the *Fighting Fantasy* system (Jackson and Livingstone 1982), as a way to introduce students to game design, narrative and narrative construction in games, and how to think about non-linear storytelling. We argue that this assignment, which has been used successfully in multiple undergraduate and graduate classes, affords myriad learning opportunities including practice knitting story with game mechanics and an opportunity to gain a more nuanced understanding of how they interact and interrelate.

Keywords
Game education, fighting fantasy, gamebook, RPG gamebook

INTRODUCTION
While role-playing has been considered an important tool and technique for encouraging learning (e.g. Wohlking and Gill 1980; van Ments 1999), it seems to be used less often for learning about game design, interactive storytelling, or narrative development as it relates to games. We argue that role-playing gamebooks (RPG gamebooks) provide a unique set of affordances that can be used by instructors to help their students. For example, Newman (1988) described how using gamebooks was helpful for students planning their adventure game designs while Siddle and Platts (2011) argued they could be productive in supporting software design education. Copeland (1987) argued that reading these kinds of books could lead to better a understanding of narrative structure. We feel that writing gamebooks can help students broaden their knowledge of games as a medium and gain a deeper understanding of the role of narrative and gameplay and how they interact and interrelate within a game. We make this argument in the context of the importance of sharing and establishing pedagogical practices in game studies (Waern 2013).

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Gamebooks

Gamebooks, sometimes informally called "choose-your-own-adventure" (CYOA) or branching narrative books, are texts where a story is experienced by reading through a series of numbered sections. At the end of each section the reader is offered a choice, and then based on that choice, moves to the next corresponding section (Costikyan 2007). The earliest commercial examples of this format date to the 1970's with the publication of "The Adventures of You on Sugar Cane Island" by Edward Packard and the later creation (with R. A. Montgomery[1]) of the highly successful "Choose Your Own Adventure" book series (McMillan 2013). At the same time, and probably as a parallel development, Rick Loomis published *Buffalo Castle* – a standalone adventure for the *Tunnels & Trolls* paper and pencil RPG that was designed for solo play (Appelcline 2014, 120). Solo RPG adventures differentiated themselves from branching narrative books in that, in addition to the reading and decision-making, they required players have knowledge of, and experience with, the rules of the game they were designed for. So, while they were written and designed for solo play, they required knowledge and understanding of game rules that were not included or part of the book.

This changed with the publication of the first book in the *Fighting Fantasy* series: *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982) by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingston. Their innovation can be described as the addition of rules and game mechanics to the CYOA format or in the design of a pencil and paper RPG system simple enough that it could be self-contained in an RPG solo adventure. Either way, their innovation was a commercial runaway success (Green 2014). We define "RPG gamebooks" as gamebooks with additional rule systems used, together with narrative choices, to determine how to progress. For example, the reader may have to roll dice to fight monsters and track damage taken using a character sheet. In addition to the Fighting Fantasy series, other popular RPG gamebooks include those in the *Way of the Tiger* (Smith and Thomson 1985) and *Lone Wolf* series (Dever 1984).

Using RPG Gamebooks in Class

Due to their perceived simplicity we felt RPG gamebooks, specifically having to write an RPG gamebook from scratch, might be a productive exercise not only for novice game designers with little writing experience, but also for more advanced students learning about the complexities of introducing narrative into game design. The rationale for this exercise is also supported by existing theories of learning. Constructivism promotes the idea that learners actively participate of the learning process by building knowledge structures for themselves through a process of assimilation and accommodation (Vygotsky 1978). This is usually accomplished by having learners create artifacts that can help them reflect on the things they are learning and figuring out. Additionally, it is important to provide moments during which this reflection can happen as well as iteration in which ideas can be tested, improved, and further developed. Constructionism, as an extension of constructivism, suggests that people learn better through building personally meaningful artifacts and sharing them with others. (Bruckman 1998; Papert 1991). The

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[1] Curiously, the connection between gamebooks and role-playing games was noticed by Montgomery. He was excited to publish Packard's book since it resonated with his experience working with Clark Abt Associates analyzing the use of role-playing for problem solving. Thus, he "saw [Montgomery's book] for what it was: a role-playing game in book form" (Unknown 2014).

idea here is that people will learn better when they work on things they care about. Sharing with others can provide opportunities for feedback but, perhaps more importantly, opportunities for reflection on how others perceive and understand what the learner is doing. Another important aspect of constructionism is the need for the learning activities to incorporate multiple personal and epistemological connections (Turkle and Papert 1992). In the case of this assignment, we felt that in addition to providing an exercise in which learners could leverage their own ideas and creativity, they could also approach this exercise as game designers (understanding how to integrate narrative with gameplay) or writers (understanding how to integrate gameplay with narrative). Allowing learners to tackle the challenge of creating an RPG gamebook from their personal perspectives means that there is no "correct" (or "incorrect") way to work on the assignment.

We believe this approach has allowed us to develop a successful assignment that has now been used in three courses: an introductory game design class (undergraduate), an advanced game writing class (undergraduate), and a narrative in game design class (graduate). However, while these base assignment was the same, it was implemented differently in each class. In the design class students were tasked with individually writing an RPG gamebook with a minimum number of paragraphs (nodes). The assignment took place over several weeks during which students developed a concept and outline, turned in a draft, participated in class playtest sessions where they read each other's gamebooks, and submitted a final (polished) RPG gamebook (see Appendix A). This was done over the course of four weeks. In the advanced writing and the narrative classes, the gamebook assignment played a more central role and was developed during an entire semester (see Appendix B). The differences with the design class were requiring additional preliminary documents (e.g. plot, character, and setting summaries) as well as in-class writer's workshop activities where these documents were discussed and revised.

We found that students generally enjoyed the assignment and were also often highly motivated (e.g. their submissions typically far exceeded the minimum requirements we provided). We feel that this assignment, in both of the formats we have experimented with, has been successful in getting students to critically reflect on the role that story and narrative play in games and to better understand the challenges of integrating gameplay and narrative. Furthermore we feel it has helped dispel many misconceptions students have about games and narratives. For example, the idea that it is "easy" to develop good narratives and knit them together with compelling gameplay.

Hypotheses Regarding Success

Why does this assignment succeed? We hypothesize that using a pen-and-paper assignment may help sidestep the distraction that having to learn a separate tool can create (e.g. Inform, Twine). This might especially be the case for tools that are significantly "overpowered" with regards to the needs of our assignment. Not having to worry about technical issues can allow students to concentrate on narrative and gameplay. This format also allows for easier use in the classroom. Students feel more comfortable sharing their (printed) gamebooks with each other and it is easier to flip back and forth between pages as they are read. Also, the barrier to writing comments, corrections, and suggestions is much lower.

Another hypothesis we have has to do with the voice used to write RPG gamebooks. Most RPG gamebooks are written with a second person narrator. We think that by writing from this least practiced narratorial point-of-view a student is forced to reframe how they

would normally tell a story. They must change their own perspective to that of the player/reader, thereby naturally implementing a fundamental playcentric design principle (Fullerton, Swain, and Hoffman 2008). In effect, we believe we have seen students engage with what Herman (2002) describes: when designing from the second person point-of-view students viscerally experience that "narrative you" that creates a moment of "ontological hesitation" for the writer as he shifts between being reader and writer. In other words, "for these books to succeed, the 'you' must be allowed to be developed by and take on the characteristics of the reader. The 'you' isn't just another character in the book. The 'you' becomes either the reader, or in many cases, the character the reader would really like to be" (Copeland 1987). We argue that it isn't a far jump from reader to player to designer here, and that this cognitive back and forth has been a powerful tool in our classrooms.

Sometimes students can't make the jump into second person narration. It's too foreign a concept, or they start with it but end up changing POV while writing and don't notice. These issues have opened up excellent teaching moments for us, and have created some of the best examples for teaching design principles in class. Furthermore, those students who make the leap to fully embrace the second person POV tend to have more complex and deeper stories and also seem to create more robust game mechanics. This reframing brings up interesting contrasts for the novice game designer or writer when comparing it to the first person experience of playing a game. The RPG gamebook turned out to be an excellent tool for creating that 'aha!' moment when a student viscerally recognizes the difference between being a player instead of a game creator. That being said, further investigation in this area is warranted.

A third hypotheses we have has to do with the nature of the choices that RPG gamebook readers must make. As Logas argues, in most digital games players make choices regarding spaces – where to go determines what happens next (Logas 2004). RPG gamebooks, on the other hand use decisions to drive the game forward emphasizing the choices the reader can make in a particular situation (rather than the places she can travel to). We argue that this shift also encourages the designer/author to assume a player-centric view that highlights decision-making and choices.

Initially we were concerned that students would find gamebooks archaic and thus uninteresting. The heyday of RPG gamebooks occurred in the 1980's (Schick 1991), which took place before the birthdates of many of our students. We were surprised by how excited students were to learn about a genre of games that is usually unknown to them. It is possible that the novelty helps minimize preconceptions about narratives and games allowing students to engage more fully with the essential issues we want them to consider. This lack of familiarity suggests that students would need to spend extra time and effort exploring and understanding the medium. However, while there are many sample gamebooks available online, most famous titles are out of print and unavailable. This makes it harder for students to experience what we might consider the exemplars of the form. On the other hand, having access to amateur gamebooks seems to give students additional license to be critical – they feel they can do better than the examples they've read and played.

We have noticed that students often arrive with a desire to tell a specific, grand story that is large, long, and complicated. Even when they don't arrive with a story, they typically overscope their project. As they begin to develop their gamebooks, they quickly realize the magnitude of their undertaking. Furthermore, their thinking is challenged as they

realize they need to figure out what it means to present that grand story in a non-linear way. They often haven't thought about non-linear storytelling even if they have experienced it before. So, this project helps students develop a better sense of the scale and scope of the writing requirements a reasonably sized game project entails. Since students tend to overscope their game projects anyways, learning about these challenges on a small-scale paper and pencil gamebook can be beneficial.

We feel that using RPG gamebooks over regular gamebooks provides additional benefits. The most immediate is that RPG gamebooks encourage thinking about how gameplay and narrative interact and reinforce each other in a way that is immediately apparent and, more importantly, accessible to learners. Students can also begin to explore how gameplay can help create interesting narrative moments: a fight against a tough monster might be more evocative and dramatic to play through rather than simply reading an exciting description. As a final idea, it seems that some of the success of this assignment may come from the fact that it provides multiple approaches for success. Students with strong writing experience enjoy experimenting with the novelty of the narrative format. Other students prefer to experiment with the game mechanics and system. This means that the assignment has aspects that appeal to different sensibilities or interests, while still requiring a holistic approach that addresses everything.

CONCLUSIONS

RPG gamebooks have proved to be a productive pedagogical tool on a variety of levels. They expose students to "new" game forms, teach fundamental narrative construction and design principles, and workshops and playtesting segments increase respectful and necessary collaboration between developing gamemakers. While we are encouraged by the success we have had with this assignment so far, and we invite others to build upon it, we also recognize that we are only hypothesizing as to the reasons of its success. Further research is still required in particular regarding our implications of the importance of the second person narratorial perspective and the combination of gameplay and narrative. As a final thought and observation, perhaps it is because of the liminal place that RPG gamebooks occupy in a design space that often contrasts "game aspects" with "story elements" (e.g. Costikyan 2000) that we are able to better allow our students to examine these tensions. Thus, it might be pedagogically productive to focus on genres and artifacts, e.g. RPG gamebooks, that exist along these fault-lines.

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APPENDIX A: GAMEBOOK ASSIGNMENT (DESIGN CLASS)

For this project you will write a short *Fighting Fantasy* Gamebook. In a gamebook the story is read through a series of numbered text sections. At the end of each section the reader makes a choice (relative to the narrative) and continues reading the text section that corresponds to that choice (e.g Table 1). Gamebooks are sometimes called "Choose your own adventure" books. For this assignment you will use the *Fighting Fantasy* rules system. This is a role-playing like system with stats as well as dice-rolling. This means that sometimes, instead of choosing which section to read next, the reader has to resolve a situation via gameplay (e.g. fight a monster) and the next section to read is determined by the results of that gameplay (e.g. if you defeat monster, turn to X, otherwise turn to Y).

The theme of your gamebook can be whatever you like (e.g. fantasy, horror, modern day, etc.) and it must have at least 25 sections (at least 3,000 words).

1

It's early Monday morning and you've been up most of the night working on a homework assignment. You feel really tired and want to go to sleep but you have a class that starts in 20 minutes. Will you go lie down for a few minutes (**turn to 3**), hit the shower (**turn to 15**), or head into the kitchen (**turn to 21**)?

2

You cannot believe your luck as the falling masonry barely misses you. The teacher's assistant was not so fortunate. You rush forward to help. If you're carrying your backpack **turn to 11**, otherwise **turn to 40**.

3

You lie down for a few minutes and before you know it you're fast asleep. Suddenly, you hear your roommate yelling at you to wake up. "Hey! We've got to make it to class NOW, there's a surprise quiz!" You leap out of your bed and head for the door, you've only got time to grab one thing before you dash for class. Do you shove your phone into your pocket (**turn to 18**) or do you shoulder your backpack (**turn to 35**)?

Table 1: Sample Gamebook Excerpt

This project has three deliverables. Please refer to the course syllabus for when these are due as well as how many points each is worth. You will also read each other's gamebooks in class and provide feedback. The main phases/deliverables are:

1. Gamebook Project Preliminary
2. Gamebook Draft
3. Playtest/Reading (in-class)
4. Gamebook Final

Gamebook Project Preliminary

For the preliminary, you need to turn in a document that includes the following:

1. Title of your gamebook
2. Theme/Setting/Characters (one paragraph approximately)
    a. You should describe some of the particulars of the theme and setting you have chosen. It's not enough to simply say "fantasy" or "sci-fi". Where does it take place? Who are the main characters?
3. Flowchart/Plot Outline
    a. This chart/outline should describe the game's overall plot. It should also highlight the major plot points/events. Think of this flowchart as a map.

The Flowchart / Plot Outline is the most important part of this deliverable. Its purpose is to help you plan and organize your story. Are there any side-plots? How many paragraphs/sections do you need? Are there any key sections you want to make sure every player reads? The flowchart also provides a visual way to gauge the overall "flow" of your gamebook. The flowchart can also give you a rough sense of the pacing of your gamebook. Are you spending too many paragraphs on an individual encounter? Does it take too many paragraphs before the action begins?

Figure 1: "Dirty" Flowchart

Figure 1 shows an example of a flowchart. Note that each box indicates a “paragraph” or section in the gamebook. The arrows leaving the boxes represent the “destinations” of any choices or results from that “paragraph”. This means that a box with no outgoing arrows is an ending (there could be several) and a box with no incoming arrows is the beginning (there should only be one). For this deliverable, I’m expecting a “cleaner” flowchart. You’ll need boxes and arrows, but also a short (1-2 sentences max) description of what each box is about. You might want to consider labeling the arrows as necessary.

Gamebook Draft

Using the template provided, you must turn in a complete *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook that’s at least 3,000 words long and has a minimum of 25 sections. If you’ve made any changes to the structure since the preliminary, you must also turn in an updated version of your flowchart (it would be highly unusual if you didn’t, so you should probably assume you’ll have to turn this in as well). I strongly recommend you look at the *Additional Resources* section below. You’ll find references to articles with suggestions and ideas for writing gamebooks as well as sample adventures to read. Also, look at the grading criteria table.

Playtest/Reading in Class

On the designated day (see syllabus), you must bring a printed copy of your gamebook as well as two dice. Your gamebook will be played/read by at least one other student (and you will read/play someone else’s). During class we will discuss each other’s gamebooks and you will be expected to provide written feedback (during class) that can be used to improve their gamebook you read. For a general sense of what’s important refer to the table of criteria described in the following section as well as our in-class discussion.

Gamebook Final

See Gamebook draft above but incorporating the feedback you’ve received in class as well as from me. Gamebooks will be graded using the following criteria:

Criteria	Excellent	Good	Poor
Quality and Clarity of Writing	Gamebook is easy to understand and follow. It flows well and makes sense.	Some parts are confusing and hard to understand.	Narrative doesn’t make sense and is hard to comprehend.
Motivating	Has many creative details that contribute towards enjoyment. Might have novel gameplay within the Fighting Fantasy ruleset.	Has some creative details that contribute towards enjoyment in its story or gameplay.	Has few creative details and is not enjoyable in either its story or gameplay.
Problem / Conflict	Reader can easily understand the problem faced by the main character (reader).	Reader cannot easily understand the problem faced by the main character (reader).	The main character (reader) does not have a problem to solve.
Balance	Gamebook is challenging but fair. Difficulty increases gradually.		Gamebook is too easy or too hard (could be puzzles or combat). Can’t win without “cheating”.
Grammar and Spelling	Fewer than 4 grammar or spelling mistakes.	Fewer than 6 grammar or spelling mistakes.	More than 6 grammar or spelling mistakes.
Linearity	More than one sideplot, multiple (>2) endings.	One sideplot, multiple (>2) endings.	Single plot, fewer than 2 endings.

Additional Resources

1. How to Write a FF Adventure (FightingFantasy.com) Starts here:
    a. http://www.fightingfantasy.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=112
2. “The Adventure Game – How to Write your Own Fighting Fantasy Book” by Andrew Wright
    a. Part 1 – Fighting Fantazine Issue #4, pp 56-59.
    b. Part 2 – Fighting Fantazine Issue #5, pp 96-99.
    c. Part 3 – Fighting Fantazine Issue #9, pp 84-89.
3. Fan-written Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks are available in pdf here:
    a. http://fightingfantazine.co.uk/back.html
4. Lone Wolf Gamebooks (another series) are available here:
    a. http://www.projectaon.org/en/Main/Books

Fun Facts / Trivia

The Fighting Fantasy series was originally created by two Englishmen: Steve Jackson (not the same as the American game designer by the same name) and Ian Livingstone. Together with John Peake, they also founded Games Workshop. Steve Jackson currently works at Lionhead studios (which he co-founded with Peter Molyneux) and serves on the faculty at Brunel University where he teaches in their Digital Games Theory and Design program. Ian Livingstone also went on to work in the videogame industry. He is currently “Life President” of Eidos. As part of the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of Fighting Fantasy, Livingstone recently authored “Blood of the Zombies”.

Image Credits and Acknowledgements

1. Figure 1 from Fighting Fantazine No. 5, pg 98 by Andrew Wright.
2. Grading criteria adapted from http://www.nhis.k12.hi.us/lum%20website/documents/Scoring%20Rubrics%20for%20script%20writing%20august%2011%202011.pdf and http://www.mrbrooks.ca/rubrics/rubric_script.htm

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE SCHEDULE (GAME WRITING CLASS)

Week	
1	Introduce Gamebook Project and deliverables.
2	Discuss beginning narrative theory and assigned readings. Play Fighting Fantasy examples.
3	Continue discussion of interactivity and storytelling (facilitated by readings and game assignments)
4	Discuss Hero's Journey and assigned readings and game. Students turn in gamebook Preliminary Pitch.
5	Discuss readings on Plot and game exemplars. Students turn in 'Plot Summary' **Plot Summary:** 2-3 pages of written work summarizing the complete plot of the gamebook. In effect, the beginning, middle and end of the gamebook in a concise fashion. (Typically, students cannot write the branches of the story this early, but getting on paper one linear story starts the process)
6	In-class writer's workshop discussing the plot of their gamebooks.
7	Discuss readings on Setting and game exemplars. Students turn in 'Setting Summary' **Setting Summary:** 2-3 pages of written work summarizing the setting of the gamebook. This is where the students begin to world build. (Typically, students want to write very surface level descriptions of many locations, but they are directed to instead write about one setting more fully using concrete details)
8	In-class writer's workshop discussing the setting of their gamebooks. Gamebook plot outline/flowchart due.
9	Spring or Fall Break (typically around this week)
10	Discuss readings on Character and game exemplars. Students turn in 'Character Summary' **Character Summary:** 2-3 pages of written work summarizing the protagonists and antagonists of the gamebook. (Typically, students want to write superficial descriptions of many characters, but they are directed to instead write about the main characters deeply)
11	In class writer's workshop discussing the characters of their gamebooks.
12	In class writing exercises (self-selecting groups based on what students want to work on most – plot, setting, character).
13	Draft of gamebook due. Playtest in class.
14	Discussion of playtests.
15	Open week
16	Final in-class playtest

APPENDIX C: FURTHER NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

Over the course of teaching the RPG gamebook, we have found that adding additional assignments round out the experience and have proven fruitful in a variety of ways.

As you can see in Appendix B above, for the graduate level version of the class we added three workshops. The main goal was to introduce the disparate students in the course (e.g. artists, engineers, and producers together) to basic narrative terminology, and to what building blocks make up a story. By separating Character, Setting, and Plot we could discuss their components individually, and then focus on interweaving them together later. Additionally, it also provided practice for learning how to give and take feedback. This can't be understated as a goal of the workshop.

The other addition we highly recommend having students play games outside of class, and then discuss those games in class. For example, students play *Journey* (That Game Company 2012) before the class discusses the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949). Or they play *Papers, Please* (Pope 2013) for a discussion of plot. We have recently been having students play *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios 2013) to discuss mechanics as metaphor, but the list is really endless. We do try to keep the games shorter and free if possible. Having this shared list of games they have played gives the students in essence a shared vocabulary and that facilitates discussions all the way through the entire course.

Finally, for the playtests, students bring their gamebooks in either written form (preferred), or on a computer, and will also bring any other tool they require (dice, cards etc.). Each student's game typically goes through two or three play sessions. For us, the draft playtest process at the graduate level has been more fluid than at the undergraduate level. For example, we haven't used the rubric provided in the base gamebook assignments since the student have gravitated back into their workshop groups to do the playtesting. This means they have already developed a good rapport with each other and they get immediate feedback from their group. Additionally, students report enjoying seeing the disparate parts of the story they've been reading over the course of the semester brought together, and in future we will incorporate that into the standard procedure. The final playtests are done outside of their workshop groups.